

Rainforests and tropical reef habitats are disappearing at an alarming rate. Earlier this week, the House passed my legislation, H.R. 2185, the Tropical Forest and Coral Conservation Act of 2007. I introduced this bipartisan legislation with Congressman Alcee Hastings (D-FL) to renew the debt-for-nature program which provides debt relief to developing countries that invest in tropical forest conservation. This is one of the most successful conservation programs in history. Remember, Yellowstone National Park protects two million acres. Under the Tropical Forest Program, we protected more than 136 million acres -- the equivalent of 68 Yellowstone Parks -- in Bangladesh, Belize, Botswana, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and the Philippines since the program's inception in 1998.

The Kirk legislation also expands this critical conservation program to include the protection of coral reefs and associated coastal marine ecosystems. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates that as much as 60 percent of the world's coral reefs may be destroyed by the year 2050 if the present rate of destruction continues. The Tropical Forest and Coral Conservation Act would make more than 40 percent of the world's coral reefs eligible for these important conservation measures.

This legislation has enormous consequences for the existence of critical ecosystems, the health of our planet and the livelihoods of millions of people across the globe.



The Kirk-Hastings legislation will make 40 percent of the world's coral reefs eligible for conservation programs



Tropical forests contain about half of all species of plants and animals on the planet

For more on the Kirk-Hastings legislation, read below:

CQ: House Passes Coral Reef, Ecosystem Preservation Bill By CQ Staff

Legislation designed to provide developing countries with incentives to preserve coral reefs and marine ecosystems was passed by the House on Tuesday by voice vote.

The bill (HR 2185), sponsored by Republican Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, would expand a program under the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (PL 105-214) to offer debt relief to countries that protect coral reefs or marine ecosystems.

The Foreign Affairs Committee approved the bill by voice vote July 31.

Current law allows countries to accumulate relief from U.S. loans in exchange for protecting tropical forest land. Each dollar spent on those environmental projects — often a low priority in the developing world — translates into a dollar of debt relief.

The measure would add coral reefs to areas eligible for protection under the program and would reauthorize it through 2010, which Kirk said would be a boon to Caribbean nations.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a companion bill (S 2020) on Sept. 11.

Sun Sentinel: U.S. to Caribbean: Reduce loans by preserving reefs, forests

Backed by ocean research groups in Florida, Congress is poised to give developing nations in the Caribbean and elsewhere a chance to pay off some of their debt to the United States by preserving forests and coral reefs.

Every dollar that qualified nations spend to preserve these fragile ecosystems would reduce their debt by a dollar under a bill passed by the House on Tuesday evening and cleared for passage in the Senate.

"This bill is truly a win-win-win situation," Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar, told the House. He and co-sponsor Mark Kirk, R-Ill., say it would help friendly nations in the Caribbean, South America and Asia while nurturing the environment.

"By providing incentives for developing nations to conserve their coral resources, we are in effect protecting coastal landscapes and maintaining coastal quality of water of some of the most important coral reef ecosystems in the world," Hastings said.

The bill passed by voice vote, a procedure often used when legislation has little opposition.

It extends the Tropical Forest Conservation Act, which provides "debt-for-nature swaps" with 12 nations. Over seven years, these swaps generated \$135 million of debt relief while conserving about 50 million acres of tropical forests.

The bill passed by the House this week expands the number of eligible nations and adds preservation of coral reefs and marine ecosystems as well as all forests to the program.

Eligible nations include some of Florida's leading trading partners, such as Jamaica, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama.

Environmental advocates support the bill, as do two research groups in Florida that study reef preservation: the Florida Aquarium in Tampa and the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution of Fort Pierce.

"Deforestation and nutrient runoff from agriculture are killing coral reefs in much of the Caribbean. It's even happening in Florida now," said Jan Petri, director of government affairs at Harbor Branch. "A lot of the fertilizer used to grow crops gets washed into the ocean. Seaweeds and sea grasses then grow on reefs, suffocating the corals."

"It could have an impact if there is an economic incentive for nations to preserve the reefs," Petri said. "It helps maintain and encourage tourism, which is the mainstay of their economies."

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed a companion bill last month, clearing it for debate by the full Senate on a date not yet set.